DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 276 941 CG 019 558

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TITLE The Social Networks of Employed Couples: The Role They Play in Coping with Stress.
PUB DATE Nov 86
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the National Council on Family Relations (Dearborn, MI, November 3-7, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Coping; *Dual Career Family; *Employed Parents; *Family Relationship; *Social Networks; *Spouses; *Stress Management

ABSTRACT

As growing numbers of families are being supported by two employed parents, it becomes increasingly important that clinicians and researchers understand the factors affecting how successfully families cope with the demands of this life style. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between the structure of spouses' social networks and the coping styles used in two-income families. Seventy-nine couples, in one of four work arrangements (dual career, dual earner, mixed status, and traditional breadwinner/homemaker) participated in the study. Subjects completed a mailed questionnaire seeking demographic and social relationship information. Results suggest that couples in different work arrangements do vary in the way their social networks are structured, how they interact with members of their networks, and the coping strategies they typically use. Dual career and mixed status couples appeared to be more autonomous or distant from their networks, both physically and behaviorally, than were dual earner and traditional couples. Their networks were less dense, had fewer kin, lived further away, and provided less frequent contact. The picture of coping strategies suggests that dual-earner couples are more likely to mobilize and seek community support, while dual-career couples are least likely to rely on spiritual support during stress. Data suggest that when stress is controlled for, structural network characteristics are not particularly helpful in understanding quality of life; most networks, regardless of their characteristics, operate fairly similarly when life appears to be normal. (ABL)

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ED276941

The Social Networks of Employed Couples: The Role They Play in Coping with Stress

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CG 019558

Paper presented to the Family Action section of The National Council on Family Relations, November, 1986.

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ABSTRACT

As growing numbers of families are being supported by two employed parents, it becomes increasingly important that clinicians and researchers understand the factors affecting how successfully families cope with the demands of this life style. The purpose of the present study was to examine the relationship between the structure of spouses' social networks and the coping styles used in two-income families. Seventy-nine couples, in one of four work arrangements; dual career, dual earner, mixed status, and traditional breadwinner/homemaker participated in the study. Results suggest that couples in different work arrangements do vary in the way their social networks are structured, how they interact with members of their networks, and the coping strategies they typically use. The finding that dual career and mixed status couples appear to be more autonomous or distant from their networks than are dual earner couples is discussed in light of the how each group might be expected to function during times of high stress.

A major change in how American families live their lives is currently underway as increasingly larger numbers of families are being supported by two incomes. An average of more than one million women have entered the labor force in each of the years from 1971 to 1978, with much of this increase due to the employment of mothers of young children. By 1979, 54% of all mothers were in the labor force (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1980). Accompanying this move to a "dual income" lifestyle are, according to family theorists and researchers, new sources of stress for the family. These sources of stress, though varying in form, originate largely from conflicts in the commitments of time and energy required to adequately fulfill worker, partner, and parent roles (e.g., Pleck, Staines, & Lang, 1980).

As this family form increases, existing gaps in our knowledge must be addressed. To date, the bulk of our empirical knowledge or working couples comes from studies of "dual-career" couples in which each partner is pursuing a profession which requires a high degree of commitment and has a continuous development (Rapoport & Rapoport, 1971). It is likely, however that the problems, as well as the resources, of these couples may differ from other working couples. As Dempster-McClain and Moen (1983) point out, dual-career couples make up only 12% of the families in which both spouses are employed, while dual-earner couples (defined as those engaged in gainful employment which does not have a developmental character) make up 60% of working couples and mixed status couples (defined as one professional and one non-professional) make up the remaining 28%. It is therefore imperative that when considering the

impact of dual employment on different aspects of family functioning, each type of employment group, including those following the "traditional" working arrangement of a breadwinner husband and a homemaker wife, should be looked at for both their unique and common qualities.

Although many factors contribute to how couples in different work arrangements deal with stress and to their overall adjustment, the level of social support available to the couples may be particularly worthy of consideration. The importance of supportive social relationships in coping with stress is well-documented (e.g., Cobb, 1976; Mitchell & Trickett, 1980) yet working couples may experience so many demands on their time that social relationships suffer and they cannot avail themselves of this resource diring times of stress. It is also possible that the composition of couples' social networks may vary as a function of their work arrangement. Not only may couples in different work arrangement select and maintain social relationships for different reasons, but the network members may come from different sources (e.g., neighborhood versus workplace). Network members may also have different degrees of involvement among themselves (i.e., density), and vary in their availability to the couple as a function of free time and physical distance. All of these variations in networks have implications, of course, for the amount of material, instrumental, and emotional support that social networks can provide for couples; from childcare when parents have to work late to being a listening ear when the personal or familial stress gets too great.

The focus of the present study is two-fold. First, a descriptive profile of the social networks of couples in different work arrangements will be provided, focusing particularly on structural (e.g., density,

composition) and interactional (e.g., frequency of interaction, resources exchanged) differences. Second, the relationship between network characteristics, a couple's general coping style, and their general well-being will be examined.

METHOD

Sample

The sample consisted of seventy-nine couples; 26 of whom were dual career, 10 of whom were mixed status, 21 of whom were dual-earner, and 22 of whom were in traditional breadwinner/housewife arrangement. The average age of the individuals in the sample was 33, with a range of 22 to 63. Couples had been married an average of eight years, with a range of one to 21 years. The average amount of education was a college degree. However, 40% were not college graduates, while 30% reported having a graduate degree. Caucasian was the race of 83% of the sample, while 10% were black and 3% were Hispanic. The average individuals income was between $20,000 and $25,000. Finally, 38% of the couples had one child, 44% had two, 14% had three, and 4% had more than three children.

Procedure

Couples were identified first through random mailings to Univeristy of Maryland faculty and staff and to parents of children enrolled in local day-care centers. In addition, notices were placed in local newspapers, corporate and union newsletters, and a military base newspaper inviting couples to participate. To be included in the study at least one member of the couple had to be employed at least 30 hours per week. Due to the additional roles and demands placed on couples with children, a further criteria for inclusion was the presence of at least one child, 12 years of younger, in the home. Participants were surveyed through the use of

a structured questionnaire which was mailed to their homes for completion at their convenience and then collected by a member of the research team.

Measures

The questionnaire included demographic information about the couple and family as well as standardized instruments to assess work and family related life changes in the previous 12 months (Family Inventory of Life Events and Changes, McCubbin, 1983) family coping style (F-Copes; McCubbin, Larson, & Olson, 1982) and over-all life satisfaction (Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers, 1976). It should be noted that the family coping measure is composed of five subscales; each of which measures a different strategy that a family may use for coping with problems. These are; (a) acquiring social support, (b) reframing the problem to make it more manageable, (c) seeking spiritual support, (d) mobilizing the family to acquire professional and/or community help, and (e) passively accepting the problem (McCubbin et. al, 1982).

In addition, a social relationship instrument developed by one of the authors (Leslie & Grady, 1985) was used to assess the structural and interactional characteristics of husbands' and wives' social networks, as well as the level of material, instrumental, and emotional support available to participants from their networks. Participants were asked to identify up to ten individuals who were important in their life and then answer a series of questions concerning those relationships. Three structural network characteristics; size of the network, density of the network, and the number of kin in the network were utilized in the current analyses. Five interactional characteristics were utilized in this study, including how close individuals lived to network members, how frequently they were in touch with network members, how satisfied they were with their network of social relationships, how much support they

received from network members , and finally, how much support they gave to network members.

Participants' frequency of contact with network members was obtained by asking "How often are you in contact with each person?" The eight response options ranged from "daily" to "less than once a year". The responses were averaged across the network members to obtain an overall rating of interaction with the network. Physical closeness was assessed by averaging the responses to the question "How close does this person live to you?" The six response options ranged from "in my house" to "more than 100 miles away". Participants' satisfaction with their social networks was assessed by averaging the responses to the question, "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your relationship with each person-with the time you spend together, the things you do, and so forth?" The question was answered using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from "not at all satisfied" to "completely satisfied".

Network support variables assessed the amount of material. instrumental, and emotional support exchanged. The amount of material support received was assessed by averaging responses to the questions: "How often does this person give you an object or material thing? " and "How often does this person give you cash, a check, or a money order?" Instrumental support was assessed by averaging responses to the questions: "How often does this person share new information or facts with you?" and "How often does this person run errands or do favors for you?" Finally, emotional support was assessed with the two questions: "How often does this person praise you or show you respect?" and "How often does this person give you affection or make you feel likable?" The nine response options for each question ranged from "never" (1) to "daily" (9). Overall support received was determined by adding the three

types of support provided by each member and averaging the scores across the network members. The exact procedure was followed in determining the amount of overall support the respondents gave to members of their networks. Identical questions were asked with the focus now being how often the respondent did these things for others (e.g., "How often do you run errands or do favors for this person?").

RESULTS

A series of two-way analyses of variance were computed to assess work arrangement and gender differences in network characteristics and coping styles. Looking first at structural network characteristics, individuals in different work arrangements did not seem to differ in the number of network members identified. However, males and females were found to differ significantly in the number of network members identified ($F=4.02$, $p<.05$) with females listing more network members ($x=9.46$) than males ($x=8.86$). Significant effects were found for both work arrangement ($F=6.50$, $p<.01$) and gender ($F=5.60$, $p<.01$) on the density of the network and work arrangement differences were found for the number of kin in the network ($F=3.77$, $p<.01$). Follow-up assessment using Tukey HSD indicated that the networks of dual-career couples were significantly less dense than the networks of both traditional and dual-earner couples. Similarly, there were significantly fewer kin in the networks of dual-career couples than in the networks of dual-earner couples. Means and standard deviations for the four work groups on all network characteristics can be found in Table 1. In term of the gender difference, males were found to have more dense networks ($x=70.73$) than females ($x=59.49$). No interaction effects were found for any structural network characteristics.

Looking next at interactional network characteristics, males and

females did not differ on any features of how they interacted with their networks. Likewise, no effect was found for work arrangement on how much total support individuals received from their networks or how satisfied they were with network of social relationships. The work groups were found to differ, however, on how close they lived to network members ($F=7.44$, $p<.01$), and how frequently they were in touch with members of their networks ($F=4.07$, $p<.01$). There also appeared to be a trend level difference among the work groups on the amount of total support they gave to members of their network ($F=2.44$, $p=.07$). No interaction effects were found.

Follow-up comparisons using Tukey HSD revealed that individuals in dual-earner couples lived significantly closer to people in their social networks than did individuals in dual-career and mixed status couples, while individuals in traditional couples lived significantly closer to network members than did those in mixed status couples. As the means in Table 1 reveal, it was dual-earner families who lived closest to individuals in their social networks, with mixed status couples living furthest away and traditional and dual-career couples falling in between the two. Post-hoc assessment also indicated that individuals in mixed status couples interacted with members of their networks less frequently than did individuals in traditional and dual-earner couples. Again, it was the dual-earner couples who interacted most frequently with networks members while mixed status couples had the lowest rate of interaction. Finally, follow-up comparisons revealed no significant differences between any two work groups on the support given to network members, but an examination of the means in Table 1 indicate that couples in traditional and dual-earner arrangements provided more support for

individuals in their networks than did mixed status and dual-career couples.

Turning now to differences in the coping styles utilized by men and women in different work arrangements, no effects were found for gender on any of the coping strategies. No differences were found among the work groups on the coping strategy of reframing the problem, but a significant effect was found for work arrangement on mobilizing community resources ($F=3.56$, $p<.05$), seeking on spiritual support ($F=3.09$, $p<.05$), and passively accepting the problem ($F=3.11$, $p<.05$). In addition, a trend was seen for acquiring social support ($F=2.29$, $p=.08$). Means and standard deviations on coping strategies are found in Table 2. Post-tests using the Tukey HSD procedure revealed that individuals in dual-earner couples were significantly more likely than individuals in a traditional work arrangement to mobilize to accept community resources. Interestingly, and somewhat surprisingly, these dual-earner couples also reported passively accepting the problem more than did individuals in the traditional couples. With each of the above strategies, the scores of individuals in dual-career and mixed status couples were in between, and not significantly different from, these two groups. In terms of seeking spiritual support, a significant difference existed between dual-career and traditional couples, with those in traditional couples relying more heavily on spiritual support than did individuals in dual-career couples. Finally, no significant differences were found between any two groups on utilizing social support, although an examination of the means (see Table 2) shows individuals in mixed status couples having the highest average score on this variable. No onteraction effects were found.

After identifying how couples in different work arrangements varied

in the characteristics of their social networks and the coping strategies they used to deal with stress, we were interested in examining the contribution of these network and coping characteristics to overall well-being. A multiple regression was computed in which the previously examined variables were used as predictors of an individual's score on the quality of life or well-being rating (Campbell, et. al, 1982). An individual's score on the Family Inventory of Life Events and Changes (McCubbin, 1983) was entered into the equation first to control for the amount of stress a family had experienced in the preceeding 12 months. Although family stress is certainly an important variable to consider in assessing how social networks operate in the coping process, for our present purposes we wanted to control for it's effects so that the independent contribution of network characteristics and coping strategies could be examined. In addition, regression equations were computed seperately for males and females because of the potential confounding effect of husbands' and wives' scores (i.e., husbands and wives were reporting on the same family events and coping styles, although their network data should be independent.)

Looking first at the factors contributing to general well-being for men, two variables met the criteria (probability of F-to-enter =.20) and were entered into the equation following the inclusion of family life changes (see Table 3). The extent to which a man both gave support to and received support from his network accounted for 6% of the variance in men's general well-being scores, although the regression equation was not statistically significant. Interestingly, a higher level of giving to the network and a lower level of receiving from the network were associated with well-being.

For women, a somewhat different pattern appears. Three variables met the criteria and were entered into the equation after the inclusion of family life changes. The level of support received from the network and the extent to which a woman's family mobilized to seek community assistance and acquired social support accounted for 21% of the variance in women's' well-being scores. Support received from the network accounted for the largest proportion of the variance (10%), and unlike men, it was women who received a high level of support who reported the highest well-being. Similarly, women whose families had high levels of mobilizing to seek community support and acquiring social support seemed to fare better than women whose families were low on these coping strategies.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that couples in different work arrangements do vary in the the way their social networks are structured, how they interact with members of their networks, and the coping strategies they typically rely on. The social network picture which emerges from these data is one of dual-career and mixed status couples being more autonomous, or distant, from their networks both physically and behaviorally than are couples in dual-earner and traditional work arrangements. Their networks are less dense, have fewer kin, live further away, and are not as frequently in contact. These differences may, in part, be a function of the demanding work schedules or time commitment which careers typically mandate. Likewise, the mobility demanded by some careers may contribute to these couples having important network members in various locations and being restricted in

their ability to interact with them. These differences may also partially be a function of a value-system which promotes independence and self-reliance.

The picture of coping strategies or styles suggests that dual-earner couples are more likely to both mobilize to seek community support and to passively accept a problem, while dual-career couples are the least likely to rely on spiritual support in times of stress. Though many factors may contribute to these differences, again, a value system that promotes autonomy and personal responsibility may partially explain variations among the groups.

Finally, these data suggest that when stress is controlled for, structural network characteristics are not particularly helpful in understanding general quality of life, although the pattern of interaction with the network is somewhat more useful, especially for women. Also, the family's style of coping is helpful in understanding women's quality of life.

Two related questions seem to emerge from these data. First, we find couples who differ in both the structural and interactional characteristics of their networks, and yet no differences are found in the amount of support they received from the networks. This finding seems contradictory to the social network literature which suggests that dense, kin-filled networks which are more physically accessible are better equipped to provide individuals with needed support (e.g., Shulman, 1975; Walker, MacBride, & Vachon, 1977). It may be, in this case, that we are considering a population which is not immediately in need. The bulk of social network research has been concerned with the provision of support to those who are either in crisis or some state of identifiable need (e.g., recently divorced or widowed, unemployed). This sample was not

selected based on being in crisis or in need of support, and what these data may suggest is that most networks, regardless of their characteristics, operate fairly similarly when life appears to be normal. It may be that it is only during times of obvious need or stress that differences in networks' ability to respond and provide support becomes evident.

This possibility, then, leads to the second question. If network responsiveness or ability to provide support comes into play primarily during times of stress, what are the implications of these data for working couples during times of high stress. The most obvious implication is that it is dual-earner couples, or those we typically think of as blue-collar, who have the types of social networks which have most frequently been associated with high support. That is, networks which have a large number of kin and in which members live close by, are in frequent contact, and know one another. Similarly, it is dual-earner couples which have the highest rate of utilizing community resources, a coping style found to be related to general well-being for women. It seems possible, then, that dual-earner couples are situated in such a way socially, that they may receive more immediate and extensive support from their network in times of stress than will employed couples in which one or both partners has a career.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Network Characteristics by Work Arrangement

	Traditional n=44		Dual-Earner n=42		Mixed Status n=20		Dual-Career n=52	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Structural Network Characteristics								
Size	9.18	1.80	8.95	2.43	9.10	1.59	9.33	1.48
Density	73.63	22.87	72.67	28.28	68.30	21.57	49.77	38.82
# Kin	5.98	2.19	6.23	2.96	5.00	2.64	4.65	2.36
Interactional Network Characteristics								
Support Received	4.23	.77	4.44	.68	4.14	.77	4.16	.71
Support Given	4.79	.86	4.7	.82	4.36	.78	4.38	.85
Residence*	3.37	.83	3.32	.44	4.17	.78	3.76	.88
Frequency of contact	5.55	.68	5.59	.71	4.94	.78	5.29	.69
Satisfaction	5.64	.86	5.56	.72	5.32	1.00	5.51	.75

*The scoring for place of residence is designed so that the higher the score, the greater the distance between the residence of the participant and the residence of the network member.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for Coping Strategies by Work Arrangement

	Traditional n=44		Dual-Earner n=42		Mixed Status n=20		Dual-Career n=52	
Coping Strategy	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Reframe	30.83	3.30	29.86	3.41	30.94	3.15	29.56	3.70
Mobilize	10.86	3.21	12.93	2.59	12.35	3.31	12.31	2.97
Spiritual Support	13.41	4.70	12.98	3.90	12.00	3.30	10.96	4.37
Passive	8.09	2.09	9.56	2.50	8.78	1.87	8.81	2.18
Social Support	27.65	5.28	28.83	4.50	30.05	6.09	26.77	5.40

Table 3

Multiple Regression for Life Satisfaction

Dependent Variables	Independent Variables	Multiple R	R2	Beta
Life Satisfaction (Males)	Family Life Stressors (Control)	.21	.04	-.24
	Support Given	.26	.07	.43
	Support Received	.32	.10	-.33
Overall F = 1.82, n=79				
Life Satisfaction (Females)	Family Life Stressors	.46	.21	-.42
	Support Received	.56	.31	.25
	Mobilize	.63	.39	-.34
	Social Support	.65	.42	.20
Overall F = 8.63**, n=79				

** p<.01

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